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SUBJECT: RESULTS OF NEW VISAS-93 INTERVIEWS

REF: HCMC 395; B) HCMC 29; C) 05 HCMC 1217 AND PREVIOUS

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: In mid-May, ConGen conducted private interviews in HCMC with four VISAS-93 (family reunification) ethnic minority beneficiary families from the Central Highlands. The results are consistent with previous rounds of interviews and show improvement in the conditions for ethnic minorities, particularly with regard to religious freedom. None of the families reported any official harassment, abuse or threats. We continue to note contradictions between claims the petitioners made during the asylum-seeking process and the statements of the families made in HCMC. Over seventy percent of VISAS-93 cases to date have received passports. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On May 16 and 17, ConGenOff met in private with four VISAS-93 applicants and their families in HCMC. The petitioning husbands had fled to Cambodia following protests in the Central Highlands. As in past processing cycles (reftels), we sought to develop unfiltered accounts of conditions for ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. One ethnic Jarai family was from Gia Lai, one ethnic Ede family from Dak Lak, and two ethnic Mnong families from Dak Nong provinces in the Central Highlands.

Demographics and Living Standards

¶3. (SBU) All four families said their villages and homes were electrified. Only one family from Dak Nong (Ton Ba village) had indoor plumbing; the rest obtained water from a village well or from streams in the area. In contrast to their mothers, who had limited or no schooling and were illiterate, all children of eligible age attended school.

¶4. (SBU) All of the applicants were farmers. All said they received supplemental income from their husbands in the United States. Remittances ranged from USD 60 to 400 quarterly. Three of the families said money was sent through an ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh) courier/middleman; the other family received funds via other relatives. None of the families reported interference from local authorities in receiving the money. None of the families were aware of their anchor's occupation in the United States.

¶5. (SBU) The Gia Lai and Dak Lak interviewees reported that villages in the area were segregated along ethnic lines. The two Dak Nong interviewees said their villages were ethnically mixed. The Gia Lai applicant noted that officials prohibited ethnic minorities from selling land to ethnic Vietnamese. All four families said the police had a heavy footprint in their villages. The bulk of police officers were ethnic Vietnamese. Ethnic minorities were used as informants and undercover agents.

Discrimination in Government Assistance?

¶6. (SBU) In contrast with prior interviews of VISAS-93 applicants who said they received government assistance, three of the four families said they did not get government support that was distributed to other villagers. They did not explain why, although they did not indicate that they were denied as punishment for their anchor's actions. They said that poor villagers received government assistance consisting of rice, fish sauce, instant noodles, salt, blankets and clothes several times per year.

No Police Harassment

¶7. (SBU) None of the families reported police harassment. The families were visited by local police two to three times in the weeks following their anchor's departure to Cambodia. Police asked about their whereabouts, reasons for their departure, and whether or the family had received funds from the United States. None of the applicants reported any physical abuse or threat of abuse or arrest from local authorities since their husbands' flight. The applicants said that they did not know why their anchor's had fled Vietnam; the anchor's had not participated in anti-GVN demonstrations in the Central Highlands nor were they affiliated with any separatist movement. (Comment: According to RRS records, in two cases these reports contradict the claims made by anchors in the United States, who said they were arrested for their involvement in anti-GVN protests. End Comment.) Additionally, one applicant from Dak Rlap village in Dak Nong province had a government-issued identification card that enabled her to travel freely across the Vietnamese-Cambodian border. The applicant said she was unaware that she was authorized to do so.

Religious Freedom

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¶8. (SBU) All families said that conditions for religious freedom had improved markedly in their respective villages in ¶2005. Villagers now are able to gather and worship without incident. One applicant said that she and her husband followed no religion. However, her application and sponsor's refugee adjudication notes stated that they were persecuted for their Protestant beliefs. Another applicant stated that she and her family were Catholic and did not know why her husband would identify himself as Protestant in his refugee petition.

Passports and Documentation

¶9. (SBU) None of the families knew how to apply for a passport; one applicant said she did not know what a passport was. (Note: RRS has provided the applicants with an introductory letter to local officials to guide them through the passport application process. End Note.) There were no reported problems with local and provincial officials in obtaining civil documentation or permission to travel to HCMC. All families paid normal application fees of approximately USD 2 to 3 USD per document.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: The results of these four interviews reinforce earlier observations that most VISAS-93 applicants are not facing significant official harassment. It supports other reporting that conditions for ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, particularly for religious freedom, are gradually improving. As in previous rounds of interviewing, there were inconsistencies between the statements given by the petitioner during the asylum-seeking process and family interviews in HCMC. We cannot completely rule out the possibility that the HCMC interviewees are withholding information out of fear of local government retaliation in the Central Highlands. However, the anomalies also raise the possibility that some applicants may have misrepresented their role in unrest or the level of

oppression they faced for the purpose of immigrating to the United States. Overall progress in resolving VISAS-93 cases is steady. To date, 128 families, over 70 percent of the total caseload, have received passports from all five provinces in the Central Highlands. End Comment.
Winnick